



Beatrice Russell, sixth from the right, says singing with the Maggie's Centre Glasgow choir helped her overcome cancer and made her feel like a new woman

# Vocal support for benefits of singing

Julia Horton

PRESCRIBING singing to Scots battling cancer, lung disease or mental illness would significantly improve their health, charities have said.

Organisations including Maggie's cancer centres and the British Lung Foundation are urging the Scottish government and doctors to prescribe singing to help patients with some of the most common and deadly conditions and diseases.

The call was backed by academics who said evidence was building that greater public funding and referrals to voluntary sector groups could help slash the multi-million-pound NHS bill for serious illnesses.

Ann-Louise Ward, chief operating officer at Maggie's Centres, said hundreds of

cancer patients reaped noticeable health benefits from singing with its choirs, in locations including Edinburgh, London and Manchester.

She said: "We believe that if doctors were to prescribe singing it would make a real difference to improving the well-being of people with cancer."

Tenovus Cancer Care has pioneered choirs which research found boosted patients' health both psychologically and physically – reducing anxiety, depression and stress while also improving their immune system.

Backing singing on prescription, Tenovus chief executive, Claudia McVie, urged more health professionals to refer patients to choirs and called for the NHS to effectively cover at least some of the cost

by funding trials or schemes and financially supporting charities' efforts. She said: "I think the medical profession are waking up to the fact that we shouldn't always be giving patients drugs."

Choirs run by the British Lung Foundation have also been found to help improve breathing ability in people with serious lung diseases.

Penny Woods, its chief executive, said that, in the face of growing evidence of the benefits of singing, it was "encouraging health care professionals to refer lung health patients to local 'singing for lung health' groups."

Dr Woods added: "Someone with a lung disease, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, will often need to take constant 'top-up' breaths from their upper chest. Singing

helps to increase lung capacity, strengthens the muscles, resulting in more confident and controlled breathing."

Stephen Clift is conducting research at Canterbury Christ Church University in Kent as a result of which experts have recommended singing on prescription for a range of conditions, also including dementia and mental illness.

Professor Clift said: "There is a growing body of evidence showing the significant health benefits of singing for patients."

"It won't be for everyone but it is a very cost-effective intervention with no side effects and could, I think, save the NHS millions of pounds if adopted widely."

Singing in charity choirs for people with lung conditions has been shown to reduce patients need to use inhalers or

visit surgeries and hospitals, he added.

Other novel activities which patients can be prescribed through the NHS include walking, gym membership and, in Glasgow, playing the piano thanks to an innovative city voluntary scheme.

Last week Paths for All warned that, with one in three Scots at risk of serious health problems linked to obesity including diabetes because they were not active enough, health professionals should refer more patients to existing prescription schemes. The charity's 500-plus health walks across Scotland are led by trained volunteers and largely funded through an annual £1.2m investment by the Scottish government.

Doctors gave a mixed reception to prescribing choirs. The

British Medical Association's Scottish GP committee acknowledged the "positive mental and physical health benefits" to patients and said "many doctors undoubtedly already recommended activities like singing where "appropriate".

But it warned: "We do not see the need for a formalised GP role in this as the workload pressures already facing general practice are enormous."

The Scottish government said that, while it does not currently fund any initiatives for prescribing singing, it is "supportive of non-medical prescriptions to improve health outcomes for patients".

It was up to individual GPs to decide whether to refer patients to appropriate community and charity services, a spokesman added.

## High note of my treatment

"IT'S been a real tonic for me. You can keep all your medicines," says Beatrice Russell. She admits that at first she wasn't keen to join the Glasgow Maggie's Centre choir for cancer patients. But three years on she can't rate it highly enough, for the impact she says it has had on her health and well-being.

The 71-year-old, who was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer affecting her salivary glands in 2008, said: "I used to sing with my twin sister when we were young and we used to win prizes but she died 10 years ago and I didn't sing after that. When

someone put my name down for the Maggie's choir I said it wasn't for me, but it's been the best thing. If you're feeling low it really lifts you. I do approve of making singing available on prescription. It could help a lot of other patients."

Every year Beatrice goes for a "wee MOT" on the NHS but the weekly choir sessions have become the most valued part of her treatment to her. "You meet so many lovely people and there's so much laughter – and a few wrong notes, but you just keep going. It's made me a new woman."

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